
(12) **UK Patent Application** (19) **GB** (11) **2 052 251 A**

- (21) Application No **8014867**
(22) Date of filing **2 May 1980**
(30) Priority data
(31) **2917859**
(32) **3 May 1979**
(33) **Fed. Rep of Germany (DE)**
(43) Application published
28 Jan 1981
(51) **INT CL³**
A47L 15/46
D06F 33/02
(52) Domestic classification
A4F 29A2A
D1A B17 Q1B1B Q2C3
Q2D6 Q2D7 R11
(56) Documents cited
GB 1508469
GB 1439602
GB 927846
(58) Field of search
A4F
D1A
G3N
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(54) Method of controlling the operation of an automatic washing machine

(57) A method of controlling the operation of an automatic clothes or dish washing machine comprises measuring the surface tension and/or the water hardness and/or the electrical conductivity and/or the pH value of the washing liquid for the machine, and regulating the volume of water supplied to the machine and/or the number of changes of such water, and/or the metering of at least one additive in dependence on the measurement(s) made.

GB 2 052 251 A

FIG.1

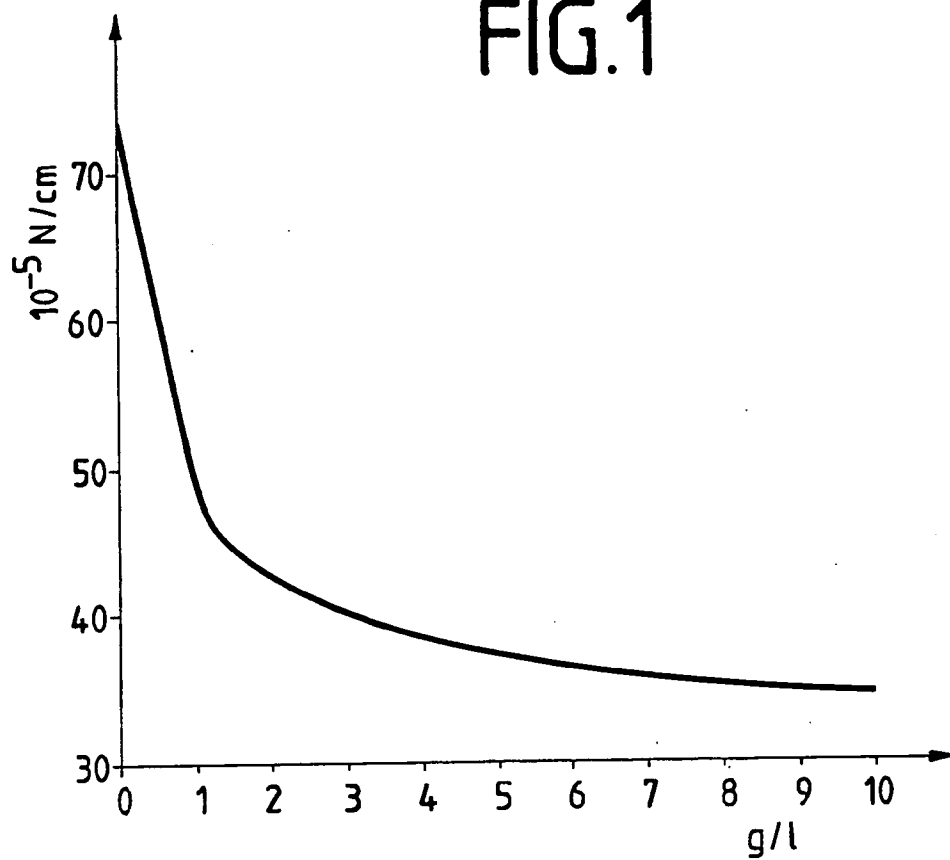


FIG.2

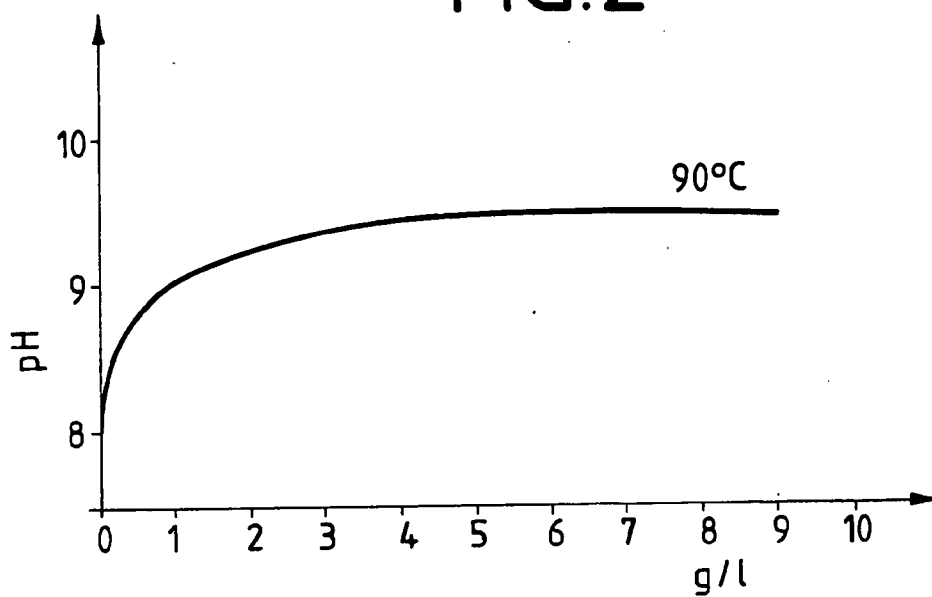
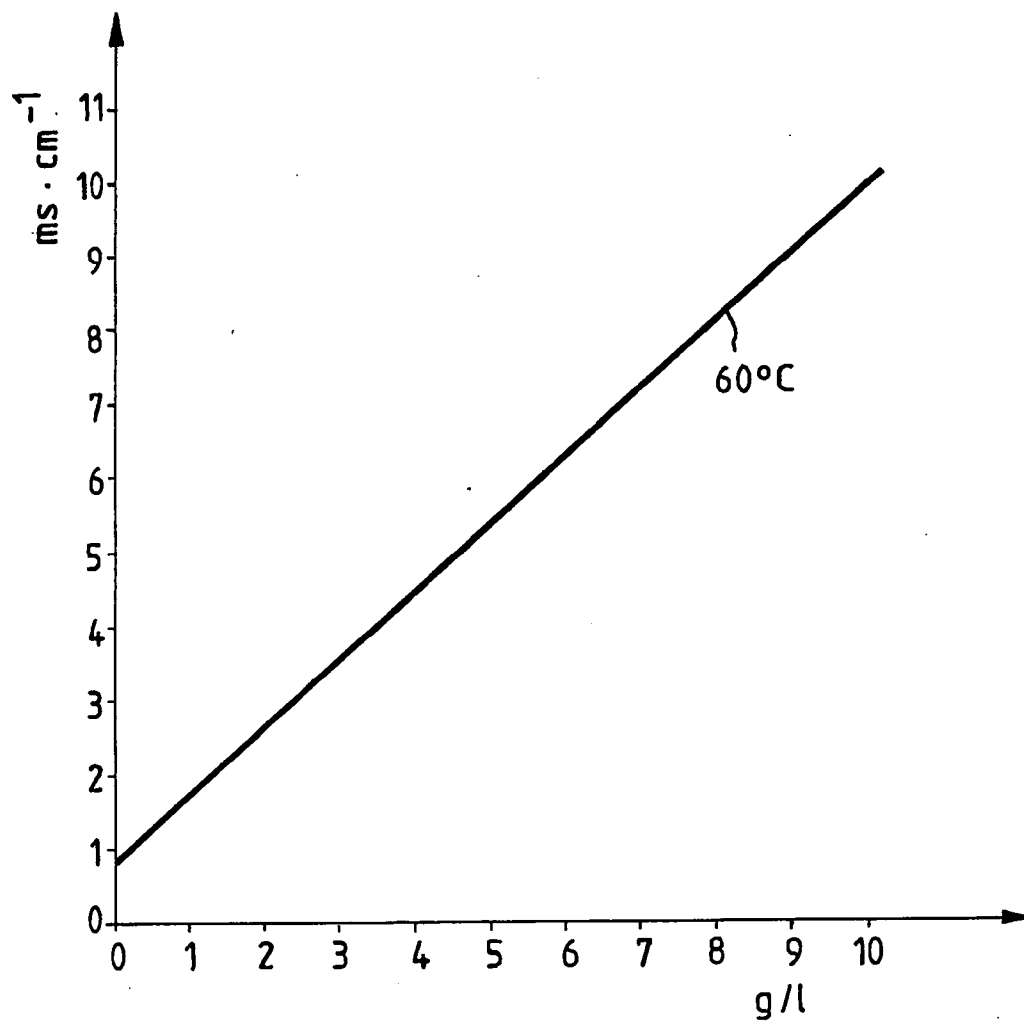


FIG.3



SPECIFICATION

Method of monitoring and controlling the operation of an automatic washing machine

5 The present invention relates to a method of monitoring and controlling an operating program, especially the water feed and/or the addition of cleaning or rinsing agents, of an automatic clothes or dish
10 washing machine.

In automatic washing machines available on the market, a particular quantity of washing powder selected for the preliminary and main wash according to the prescription of the washing agent manufacturer, or the generally used rinsing agent for a particular rinsing operation, is introduced before the start of the washing process into chambers of a rinsing tub. The chambers, which are connected with a water connection and the rinsing container of the
20 machine, are rinsed and emptied under programmed operation of the machine, so that for certain washing operations the associated cleaning or rinsing agent is supplied to the rinsing container and the water content thereof.

25 In addition, the known automatic washing machines contain a program selector switch for setting of the desired program, which is related to the nature of the laundry to be washed and the degree of soiling of the laundry articles, and program control device, in which appropriate laundering programs are stored by mechanical and/or electrical means in such a manner that during the machine operation the water feed, heating, laundry movement and water drainage are carried out in the
30 desired sequence.

The commercially available laundering agents contain different effective substances, which are present in particular weight proportion ratios. In general, the complex phosphate content of such an agent is sufficiently high for the agent to meet
40 washing requirements at, for example, water hardnesses of about 20° dH. Since this water hardness is present in only a few parts of the country, an excess amount of phosphates is usually employed in washing operations in the soft water regions. This leads to unnecessary waste of the effective substance and additional environmental pollution. On the other hand, if the metering recommendations for lower water hardness regions are followed, then the
50 washing operation can in some cases be carried out with an insufficient amount of detergent, which means that the laundry is not washed properly. In addition, although laundering agent manufacturer provide metering recommendations on packaging of the agents, there is a tendency for users to use an
55 excess amount of the agent when adding the agent by hand, which leads to pollution of the environment.

In German (Fed. Rep.) patent specification No. 25
60 54 592, there is disclosed a method of laundering textiles, in which separately stored effective substances or combinations thereof (for example, active substances for washing, framework substances, bleaching agents, catalysts, organic acids and soft

pumpable form to the washing liquid before or during the washing process. On the presumption that the effective substances of the washing agent are present in separate, pumpable form, the quantity of framework substances or phosphates to be added
70 is adjusted, depending on the water hardness at the site of the machine, during the installation of the machine according to instructions of the machine manufacturer.

75 There is accordingly a need for a method which with energy-saving and environmentally compatible operation of the machine, provides a good cleaning result and wherein the metering of additives depends on the water hardness, the quantity and the degree of soiling of the articles to be washed by the machine.

According to the present invention there is provided a method of monitoring and controlling an operating program of an automatic washing
85 machine, the method comprising the steps of measuring at least one of the surface tension, water hardness and electrical conductivity of washing liquid for the machine with the aid of measuring means of the machine and so controlling the
90 machine program by electrical control means in dependence on such measurement as to control at least one of the volume of water supplied to the machine, the number of changes of such water and the metering of at least one additive.

95 In such a method, washing and rinsing agents dissolved in the water lower the surface tension of the washing liquid and increase electrical conductivity, as well as increase the pH-value in dependence on the concentration of agents in the liquid.

100 Examples of the present invention will now be more particularly described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a graph with a plotted line showing the dependence of washing liquid surface tension on the
105 concentration in the liquid of a washing agent;

Figure 2 is a graph with a plotted line showing the dependence of the pH-value of the liquid on the concentration therein of the washing agent at a certain temperature; and

110 *Figure 3* is a graph with a plotted line showing the dependence of the specific electrical conductivity of a washing liquid at 60°C of the washing agent concentration.

Referring now to the drawings, mains water fed to
115 a clothes or dish washing machine has a higher surface tension which is strongly reduced by the smallest additions of surface-active substances. This effect is provided in washing agents by all the usual active substances, such as soaps, ionic or anionic tensides, and is the basis and a prerequisite for all successful washing operations. For the performance of a washing operation which is optimal with respect to result, rationality and automation considerations, the concentration of the washing agent can be
120 adjusted by controlling the surface tension to be a predetermined value. In addition, by measurement of the surface tension it can be determined how many rinsing operations are needed. The sensitivity of the regulating magnitude at low washing agent

regulating operations by the measurement magnitude "surface tension". This measurement magnitude includes the adhesive force associated therewith. The measurement of the surface tension can take place by a known method, for example by bubble pressure measurement, use of a tensiometer or stactometer, or by the height of rise method.

Trials have shown that the addition of a washing agent for the performance of a complete washing program in a commercially available automatic washing machine can be stopped once a surface tension of the washing liquid of 37.10^{-5} N/cm (37 dynes/cm) has been reached. As a surface tension of 69.10^{-5} N/cm was measured after a fourth rinsing operation and this value corresponded to a washing agent concentration which did not exceed the permissible residual content of washing agent content, a fifth rinsing operation - which normally is automatically provided in a conventional automatic washing machine - is not needed.

The pH-value of mains water is increased up to a certain value by the quantity of the washing agent. This increase is dependent on concentration, as shown in Figure 2 for a washing agent at 90°C. For the washing operation, the optimum concentration for a typical washing agent is about 5 grams per litre. A certain pH-value corresponds to this value at a certain temperature. If this pH-value is not present at the start of the washing, the washing agent concentration is too low compared with the optimum concentration. By means of a sensor measuring the pH-value, the agent concentration can be brought to the desired value. This also applies to further metering in the event that the agent is consumed during the washing. Similarly, such a sensor can be utilised for limitation of the number of rinsing operations, for example when the pH-value during the rinsing operations approaches or equals the pH-value of the incoming mains water. The monitoring of the pH-value can be performed in a simple and known manner, for example with a pH-value measuring device and a single rod measuring electrode as a sensor. The signal delivered by the sensor can, however, be fed directly to the control circuit for the program course.

To monitor the pH-value, the pH-sensor can be incorporated in a commercially available type of automatic washing machine so that it is in contact with the washing liquid or the rinsing water. During a washing operation at 90°C with household articles soiled with, for example, fat, a washing agent is initially added until the pH-value of the liquid is 9.5, thus at the value which corresponds to the optimum concentration. During the course of the washing program, the pH-value drops to 9.3 due to consumption of the agent, whereupon a further quantity of the agent is added until the pH-value is again 9.5. As a result there is neither over use nor under use of the agent. After the fourth rinsing operation, the rinsing water has a pH-value of 7.2, which is equal to the pH-value of the mains water used. The entire rinsing operation, originally controlled by the program switching mechanism to provide five individual rinsing cycles, can thus be stopped after the fourth rinsing cycle, which corresponds to a water saving of

about 19 litres yet provides a good overall washing result.

Mains water possesses a certain electrical conductivity by virtue of the salts dissolved therein. Since washing agents, due to the dissociable components contained therein, appreciably increase the electrical conductivity of the water in dependence on concentration, the measurement of conductivity is particularly suitable for use in terminating the rinsing operation in a washing machine. When the value of the conductivity of the mains water has been reached in the rinsing water, then the soiling components and the cleaning agent residues have been removed from the rinsing container and the articles being washed, and further rinsing cycles are not needed. The conductivity measurement can be carried out with commercially available measuring devices and conductivity measuring electrodes as a sensor.

In an advantageous manner, the pH-value of the washing liquid is measured to enable metering of the washing agent to an optimum agent concentration, and the electrical conductivity of the liquid is measured and compared with that of the fresh water for determination of the degree of cleanliness of the liquid in the course of the individual rinsing operations.

CLAIMS

1. A method of monitoring and controlling an operating program of an automatic washing machine, the method comprising the steps of measuring at least one of the surface tension, water hardness and electrical conductivity of washing liquid for the machine with the aid of measuring means of the machine and so controlling the machine program by electrical control means in dependence on such measurement as to control at least one of the volume of water supplied to the machine, the number of changes of such water and the metering of at least one additive.

2. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein the step of measuring comprises measuring at least one of the surface tension, adhesive force, electrical conductivity or pH-value of the washing liquid with the aid of at least one sensor arranged in at least one measuring location in the machine.

3. A method as claimed in either claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the step of controlling comprises transmitting measurement magnitudes to the electrical control means for comparison with predetermined magnitudes and determination or variation of at least one of the supplied water volume, the number of changes of the water and the metered quantity of at least one additive.

4. A method as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the step of measuring comprises measuring the surface tension of the washing water by a tensiometer or a stactometer.

5. A method as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the step of measuring comprises measuring the surface tension of the washing liquid by measuring at least one of the bubble pressure in the water and the height of rise of the water.

6. A method as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the step of measuring comprises measuring the electrical conductivity of the washing liquid, the method comprising the
5 further step of terminating one of a washing operation and a rinsing operation of the machine in dependence of the measured conductivity.

7. A method as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the step of measuring
10 comprises measuring the pH-value of the washing liquid and the step of controlling comprises setting the concentration of a washing agent in dependence on the measured pH-value.

8. A method as claimed in claim 7, wherein the
15 step of measuring further comprises measuring the electrical conductivity of each washing liquid during operation of the machine and fresh water to be used in the machine and the step of controlling comprises comparing measured amounts of conductivity of the
20 washing liquid with those of the fresh water and metering the supply of washing agent in dependence on the comparison result.

9. A method of monitoring and controlling an operation program of an automatic washing
25 machine, the method being substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.